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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC FLASH 4310

RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN NIACT IMMEDIATE 8887

RUQMBE/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT NIACT IMMEDIATE 2955

RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO NIACT IMMEDIATE 1867

RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS NIACT IMMEDIATE 6162

RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM NIACT IMMEDIATE 4007

RUEHJI/AMEMBASSY JIDDA NIACT IMMEDIATE 4845

RUQMYA/USLO RIYADH NIACT IMMEDIATE 1746

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SECRET TEL AVIV 05352 COMBINED SECTION

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STATE PASS SECRETARY HAIG'S PARTY

E.O. 12065: RDS-3 04/09/02 (LEWIS, SAMUEL W.) OR-M

TAGS: MILI, PEPR, IS, LE

SUBJECT: ISRAELI INTENTIONS IN LEBANON

REFS: A) TEL AVIV 5214 B) TEL AVIV 5259

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State Dept. review completed

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1. SECRET ENTIRE TEXT.

2. SUMMARY. IN EARLIER MESSAGES WE HAVE ADDRESSED THE PRESENT MOOD IN ISRAEL CONCERNING RECENT TERRORIST INCIDENTS IN ISRAEL AND ABROAD. WE HAVE CONCLUDED THAT THE ISRAELIS ARE PERILOUSLY CLOSE TO A DECISION TO RETALIATE AGAINST THE PLO OR ONE OF ITS COMPONENT GROUPS, FOR THE PLO IS SEEN AS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RECENT WAVE OF INCIDENTS. THIS MESSAGE ATTEMPTS TO ASSESS THE ISRAELI INTENT, BASED ON THE EVIDENCE OF THE PAST FEW DAYS. ISRAELI REACTION TO THE EVENTS OF THE LAST FEW DAYS HAS BEEN MORE METHODOICAL AND PUBLICLY SUBDUED THAN IT WAS IN EARLIER CLIFF-HANGERS, SUCH AS AFTER THE LATE JANUARY INFILTRATION AT MEHOLA. WHILE A GOOD CASE CAN BE MADE THAT THIS HAS BEEN ISRAELI POSTURING, DESIGNED TO SEND AN UNEQUIVOCAL SIGNAL TO THE PLO TO GET ITS TROOPS BACK IN LINE, THE PRECISENESS OF THE ISRAELI STEPS SO FAR SUGGESTS THAT THERE IS MORE AFOOT THAN SIMPLY POSTURING. OUR BEST JUDGMENT AS OF FRIDAY AFTERNOON IS THAT THE ISRAELIS HAVE NOT REPEAT NOT MADE THE DECISION TO GO INTO LEBANON YET, BUT THAT THEY ARE PREPARING THE GROUNDWORK TO GO QUICKLY IF ANOTHER NASTY INCIDENT TAKES PLACE OR IF THE CABINET DECIDES ON SUNDAY MORNING THAT ITS PATIENCE HAS BEEN EXHAUSTED. SOME PARTIAL EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THE CABINET IS SPLIT OVER THE ISSUE, WITH SHARON ARRAYED AGAINST SHAMIR AND BEGIN NOT YET DECIDED. HOWEVER, THE ASSUMPTION ON THE PART OF ALL ISRAELI DECISION-MAKERS IS PROBABLY THAT ANOTHER TERRORIST INCIDENT IS ALMOST INEVITABLE AND THAT THE CEASEFIRE, AS ISRAEL INSISTS ON INTERPRETING IT, IS NEARING ITS DEMISE. END SUMMARY.

3. IN REF A, WE CONCLUDED THAT ISRAEL IS "PERILOUSLY CLOSE TO REACHING THEIR THRESHOLD" AS FAR AS TAKING RETALIATORY ACTION AGAINST THE PLO WITH RESPECT TO THE RECENT SPATE OF TERRORIST INCIDENTS. WHILE WE BELIEVE THE ISRAELIS HAVE NOT YET GONE OVER THE LINE, THEY ARE EXTREMELY CLOSE TO DOING SO, AND IT WILL NOT TAKE MUCH TO PUSH THEM OVER THE EDGE. THE PURPOSE OF THIS MESSAGE IS TO ASSESS THE ISRAELI INTENT WITH RESPECT

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TO RETALIATION, AND TO TRY TO PROVIDE SOME INSIGHT ON WHETHER ISRAELI ACTIVITY OF THE PAST FEW DAYS HAS BEEN PRIMARILY POSTURING OR WHETHER IT SIGNALS THAT A DECISION HAS BEEN OR IS CLOSE TO BEING MADE ON A RETALIATORY MEASURE, MOST LIKELY DIRECTED AGAINST PLO TARGETS IN LEBANON.

4. DURING THE FEW DAYS AFTER THE ATTEMPTED PALESTINIAN INFILTRATION NEAR MEHOLA LAST JANUARY, THE ISRAELIS UNLEASHED A LARGE-SCALE PUBLIC AFFAIRS BLITZ DESCRIBING THE INCIDENT AS A VIOLATION AND PUTTING ALL CONCERNED ON NOTICE THAT THE GOI WAS CONSIDERING HOW TO RESPOND TO IT. IN HINDSIGHT, THE ISRAELI REACTION APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN LARGELY POSTURING, DESIGNED TO GET A MESSAGE TO THE PLO THAT IT HAD BETTER TIGHTEN UP CONTROL OR FACE THE CONSEQUENCES. THE CRUCIAL DIFFERENCE IN THE MEHOLA INCIDENT AND THE MOST RECENT SERIES OF TERRORIST-TYPE ATTACKS IS THAT SINCE MEHOLA THREE ISRAELIS HAVE BEEN KILLED AND A NUMBER WOUNDED. THE CRITERIA OF PRIME MINISTER BEGIN'S "CLEAR PROVOCATION" HAVE IN FACT BEEN MET, AT LEAST FROM THE ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE. COMMENT: THE ISRAELIS ARE WELL AWARE OF OUTSIDERS' VIEWS THAT THE EVIDENCE DOES NOT SUPPORT THE THEORY THAT THE PLO IS BEHIND THE BAR-SIMANTOV SLAYING OR THE OTHER RECENT INCIDENTS. NONETHELESS, THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE ISRAELIS WILL NOT CONTINUE TO HOLD THE PLO OR ONE OF ITS COMPONENT GROUPS RESPONSIBLE, AT LEAST INDIRECTLY. END COMMENT.

5. THERE IS SOME SUPPORT HERE FOR THE THESIS THAT THE ISRAELI REACTION OVER THE PAST FEW DAYS HAS BEEN POSTURING. IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED THAT THE HIGHLY PUBLICIZED MEETING BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE LEADERS OF

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THE LABOR OPPOSITION WAS STAGED BY BEGIN TO GIVE LABOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO COUNSEL AGAINST A LEBANON ADVENTURE, THEREBY REDUCING THE PRESSURE ON THE P.M. FOR ACTION (AT LEAST ON A MASSIVE SCALE) IN LEBANON. NEVERTHELESS, THE MEETING ALSO DEMONSTRATED THAT THERE IS WIDE AGREE-

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MENT IN ISRAEL THAT THE ATTACKS IN GAZA AND PARIS WERE BONA FIDE VIOLATIONS OF THE CEASEFIRE, EVEN THOUGH THERE WAS NO CLEAR EVIDENCE TO INDICATE THAT THE PLO WAS BEHIND THEM. IN ADDITION, FOREIGN MINISTER SHAMIR'S FUNERAL ORATION AT THE GRAVE OF SLAIN DIPLOMAT BAR-SIMANTOV PROVIDED A PUBLIC EXPRESSION OF THE GRAVITY WITH WHICH THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT VIEWED THIS INCIDENT.

6. AT ANOTHER LEVEL, A NUMBER OF OTHER EVENTS HAVE TAKEN PLACE WHICH HAVE CONVEYED THE MESSAGE THAT THE ISRAELIS ARE AT THE END OF THEIR TETHER SO FAR AS THE RECENT SERIES OF INCIDENTS IS CONCERNED. THE DIRECTOR OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE'S COMMENTS TO DATT AND SHARON'S COMMENTS TO THE AMBASSADOR ON WEDNESDAY (REF B) WERE UNMISTAKABLY CLEAR. THE FACT THAT THE PRIME MINISTER MET WITH KEY CABINET COLLEAGUES TODAY (APRIL 9) AND WILL BE HOLDING A CABINET MEETING ON THE SUNDAY BETWEEN PASSOVER HOLIDAYS (A HIGHLY UNUSUAL PRACTICE), COMBINED WITH SIGNIFICANT MOVEMENT OF MILITARY EQUIPMENT AND PERSONNEL TO THE NORTH, INDICATES THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH THE ISRAELIS VIEW THE PRESENT SITUATION.

7. THE ISRAELIS HAVE FOLLOWED A MORE SUBDUED PUBLIC LINE THIS TIME THAN THEY DID IN JANUARY, EXCEPT FOR SHAMIR'S ORATION, AND THERE IS A PRECISION IN ISRAELI ACTIVITIES OVER THE PAST WEEK THAT HAS BEEN LACKING BEFORE. MILITARILY, THEY HAVE BEEN STEADILY MOVING ACTIVE DUTY FORCES TO THE NORTH, WHICH PUTS THEM IN A BETTER POSITION TO DO SOMETHING IN LEBANON (AND DEFEND THE GOLAN AGAINST A SYRIAN RESPONSE). BEGIN HAS CONSULTED WITH THE LABOR OPPOSITION, AND IS IN THE PROCESS OF CONSULTING WITH HIS COLLEAGUES IN THE CABINET. ALL OF THIS TENDS TO SUGGEST THAT THERE IS AN OPERATIVE PLAN AROUND WHICH THESE VARIOUS STEPS ARE TAKING PLACE. IN OTHER WORDS, THE EVENTS WHICH HAVE TAKEN PLACE OVER THE PAST FEW DAYS, AND WHICH ARE TO CULMINATE IN SUNDAY'S HIGHLY UNUSUAL CABINET MEETING, ARE MORE THAN WHAT IS REQUIRED IF THE GOI WERE ONLY INTERESTED IN SENDING THE MESSAGE THAT THE PRESENT

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TREND IN TERRORIST ACTIVITIES IS UNACCEPTABLE. MILITARILY, THE IDF PREPARATIONS IN THE NORTH HAVE NOT REACHED A POINT WHERE THEY ARE READY TO GO, BUT IF THE PRESENT PACE CONTINUES, THEY WOULD BE READY IN 24 TO 48 HOURS.

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8. OUR JUDGMENT IS THAT THE GOI HAS NOT, REPEAT, NOT YET DECIDED TO GO AHEAD ON SOME SORT OF RETALIATORY ATTACK AGAINST THE PLO. HOWEVER, WE BELIEVE THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS PURSUING A METHODOICAL PREPARATION OF THE GROUNDWORK NECESSARY TO IMPLEMENT SUCH A DECISION IF IT IS TAKEN ON SUNDAY MORNING. BEGIN AND HIS KEY COLLEAGUES HAVE CONSULTED WITH THE OPPOSITION, AND LABOR PARTY LEADER PERES HAS IN THE WAKE OF THAT MEETING MADE COMMENTS SUPPORTIVE OF A GOVERNMENT DECISION TO TAKE ACTION AGAINST THE TERRORISTS IF THE ATTACKS DO NOT CEASE (ALTHOUGH LABOR SECRETARY GENERAL HAIM BAR-LEV HAS JUST COME OUT PUBLICLY AGAINST ANY FULL SCALE ATTACK). THE CABINET IS BEING BROUGHT INTO THE PICTURE, AND THE IDF IS GETTING ITSELF IN A POSITION TO GO QUICKLY IF THEY ARE GIVEN AN ORDER TO DO SO. WE ARE MORE THAN EVER CONVINCED THAT ONE MORE INCIDENT COULD BE THE TRIGGER, AND WE CANNOT RULE OUT THAT MUCH OF THE PLANNING DESCRIBED ABOVE IS PREDICATED ON THE ISRAELI BELIEF THAT ANOTHER INCIDENT IS ALMOST CERTAIN TO OCCUR.

LEWIS

END OF MESSAGE

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